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Algeria: 1646-1996

by Jean Landousies, C.M

This year, 1996, as the small Vincentian Community in Algeria commemorates the 350th anniversary of St. Vincent's sending of the first missionaries to Algeria, the land of Algeria itself has been torn apart by violence which in the space of four years has seen thousands killed, including eleven male and eleven female religious.

The central Maghreb in the seventeenth century witnessed the golden age of "the race," that "little war" which permitted the Mediterranean Powers to flourish not only by trade in merchandise, but also the slave trade. The fate of the slaves was an unenviable one on both sides of "Mare Nostrum." King Louis XIII had asked Vincent to send priests to Barbary for the corporal and spiritual relief of the Christian slaves. The Duchess of Aiguillon also wanted to be part of this good work, and on 25th January 1643 the contract was signed establishing a house at Marseilles which would serve as a base for Vincentians, and would also link up with the missionaries in N. Africa. The wording of the contract stated that the Founder of the Mission would send, when he judged it suitable to do so, priests of his Congregation "to console and instruct the poor Christian captives... in faith, love, and the fear of God, and to give missions, and the catechetical instructions and encouragement they were used to preaching."

However, the undertaking wasn't straightforward because it was felt that the Turks would only allow priests who were themselves slaves to have contact with the slaves. Vincent got round the problem: the French Consuls were authorised to have a chaplain in their houses. Accordingly, the first Vincentian arrived as chaplain to the Consul in Tunis on 22nd November 1645. Fr. Julien Guerin was accompanied by Br. Francis Francillon.

In 1646 the Duchess of Aiguillon bought the Tunisian and Algerian Consulates and made a present of them to Vincent who accepted them without enthusiasm, but in the realisation that this would allow for good relations between the Consul and the priest in charge of the slaves. Furthermore, in order to highlight the pastoral priority of his work, Vincent strove to appoint as Consul lawyers who desired to enter the Congregation, thereby freeing the priests for their pastoral ministry. As a result, the first Consul in Algeria was a former lawyer in Parliament, Br. Barreau. He arrived in 1646 with Fr. Nouelly and was recalled to France as a result of various difficulties. Another brother, Dubourdieu, succeeded him in 1661. Later a priest, Jean Le Vacher, followed, arriving in Algeria in 1668 from Tunis.

At first the priests of the Mission in the Maghreb had the powers of apostolic missionaries throughout the region. In 1650 the Pope conferred the title of Vicar Apostolic (without episcopal form) on Philip Le Vacher and his successors. Being at once Consuls and Vicars Apostolic, the Sons of St. Vincent attained a certain prestige with the Turks.

It is also interesting to read again the orders Vincent gave to the missionaries (cf., for example, Coste XIII, 306-307). The first goal of the mission was the corporal and spiritual relief of the slaves, with particular attention to the priests and religious among them. Other groups of Christians in the region, such as merchants, were not forgotten either. From

today's point of view however, the attitude required of the missionary toward the authorities and indeed all Muslims, is worth noting. Even making allowances for the time, Vincent imbued respect for the Muslims, aware that polemics produced no results. The missionary should not seek a martyrdom based on "an explicit and forthright" preaching of the gospel. Nowadays we would say that proselytising is not in fashion.

In general, relations between the priests and the Turks were good. Naturally there were tensions in matters of finance and politics, sometimes quite dramatic. On 29th July, 1683, for example, the priest Consul of France, Jean Le Vacher was put to death at the end of a canon in retaliation for the bombardment of Algiers by the French fleet under Duquesne who refused to accede to the priest's calls for moderation and treated him as "a Moor."

The arrival of Fr. Philip Le Vacher as first Vicar Apostolic in 1650 saw the beginning of the organisation of the Church. While evangelisation of the Muslims was forbidden, Christians were allowed to practise their faith. This was organised not only from the Consulate Church but also the other Churches that existed in the penal colonies of Algeria, or from the hospital attached to one of them. Priest slaves were allowed to exercise some ministry and even though it remained peripheral, Vincentians managed to buy the freedom of several hundred slaves.

The Consulates had more or less been imposed on Vincent who had always insisted that he would only look after "ecclesiastical matters or those things which included the religious state and that of the poor" (writing to Grimal 13th February 1644). By 1655 Vincent was weary of the role being forced on him and wanted an end to it. He realised that the French Government was more concerned with commercial interests than the condition of the slaves. The Duchess of Aiguillon blocked Vincent's plan and he did not succeed in it during his lifetime. The work of the Congregation for the slaves and Christians in the Algerian territory continued until the start of the nineteenth century thanks to the presence of a small community (in 1789 for example there were four priests and two brothers). At the start of the nineteenth century the outlook for French religious was bleak due to setbacks caused by revolutionary events in France. Disease also took its toll on health. In spite of that, the Vincentian presence in Algeria continued uninterrupted from 1646 to 1811 (when Fr. Joussey died after thirty years service of the slaves, and having been struck by plague three times); then again from 1824-1827. French colonisation in 1830 opened a new chapter for the Congregation in Algeria. In 1842 confreres returned and the Community has remained there continuously until the present. The first phase of colonisation was dominated by the person of Fr. Joseph Girard, known as "the eternal Father," who promoted the spread of the Congregation in N. Africa. In this period, parishes, new foundations, and the first seminary in Algeria at Kouba were set up. Fr. Girard's role, along with Cardinal Lavignerie, in the foundation of the White Fathers is also well documented. The Congregation of the Mission expanded rapidly and became a Province during the period leading up to Independence when the European population was also increasing rapidly. The three large Algerian seminaries and the seminary in Tunisia were all entrusted to the Congregation. In a word, the Congregation of the Mission has had a special place in the witness of the Church in Algeria up to the present day.

After Algerian Independence the Congregation of the Mission evolved with the Church in Algeria. While the majority of Europeans left Algeria, a small Church remained to bear witness among the Muslims to the Evangelical counsel that the love of God is for all people. Christians desire to live this truth which is central to their faith, without distinction

as to nationality or religion. The confreres who remained continue to serve the Christian community in its theological and cultural formation, and its groups of Christian students coming from Black Africa. They also serve the Algerian people in many ways through teaching young people and adults, or through the work of the Daughters of Charity and the work for the elderly. They desire to serve at the meeting point of the Church of Christ with the followers of Islam, trying to build up relations, respect, mutual brotherhood, especially by sharing their daily life and friendship.

Today, therefore, 350 years after the sending of those first missionaries, the Congregation of the Mission is still present, faithful to St. Vincent's intuition, while at the same time evolving throughout the centuries according to developments in the Church and in the country. Fidelity is borne out in the reality of human life. Today in the midst of the dramatic events taking place in Algeria, the Vincentians, in solidarity with the tiny Christian community remaining there, wish to show God's faithfulness to those who suffer. In times of gladness, as in times of suffering, in times of growth for the country as well as in times of hard ship, the Church remains faithful to those to whom it has been sent. Celebrating 350 years of fidelity to Algeria, 350 years of fidelity to the Church's mission in this country, this anniversary also challenges us in a particular way today, at a time when the Universal Church is more and more conscious of the importance of its links with other religions, and in particular with Islam. This link is a challenge for the future and for world peace. Tolerance between human beings is not enough. The future we wish to build is a future of reconciliation and love for each other. It is true that the road is a long one, but there is no other, it is the road of the Congregation of the Mission... a challenge of the Mission, and of fidelity for the Congregation.

(Eamon Devlin, C.M., translator)